

Social roots of event cognition

Supervisors: Dr. Vanessa Wilson, Sarah Brocard (PhD Candidate)

Start date: February 2024 (flexible)

Duration: 8-10 months (flexible)

Location: University of Neuchâtel (Switzerland)

To apply: Send CV, copy of transcripts and short motivation letter to Vanessa Wilson (vanessa.wilson@unine.ch) and Sarah Brocard (sarah.brocard@unine.ch)

Background:

Event cognition – our ability to interpret events within a causal and componential framework – is an ability that seems to be a fundamental aspect of human cognition, and also appears to be crucial for syntactic structure in language. Specifically, in both event viewing tasks and in event descriptions, there is a cross-linguistic tendency to favour agents (doers of actions) over patients (action recipients), an asymmetry recognised as semantic role attribution. Despite these links to language, recent research suggests that this agent bias is not unique to humans, and seems to be shared with our closest ape relatives, suggesting that it may be an ancestral cognitive capacity on which language has been scaffolded. One proposal is that semantic role attribution is rooted in evolutionary demands on social cognition that emerged with complex group living. That is, directing attention more to agents would allow observers to track the perpetrators of aggression or benefactors of social support, in order to inform future social decision making.

The project:

This project will explore whether social cognition is needed to make sense of events, or whether event apprehension relies primarily on causal processing. The goal is to examine the role of empathy on gaze responses and choices about dyadic social events. This study offers the opportunity to work both with pilot data and to conduct eye tracking/touchscreen experiments with humans.

We are looking for a highly motivated student to work on this project, who is capable of working independently. The student will be responsible for analysing pilot data, designing an experimental protocol, and conducting the experiment in autonomy.

Requirements:

- Motivation to work on an interdisciplinary topic
- Knowledge and experience of R or data handling
- Good communication skills, fluent in French and English

Useful skills:

- Knowledge of Matlab or programming experience
- Experience running experiments or other technical expertise
- Background in linguistics and/or social cognition

Recommended reading:

- Wilson et al., 2022. *Sci. Adv.* DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.abn8464
- Rissman & Lupyán, 2022. *J. Exp. Psych.* DOI : <https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0001146>
- de Waal 2008, *Annu. Rev. Psychol.*
DOI :<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.59.103006.093625>